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ABSTRACT

This digest presents an overview of effective antiviolence strategies for use with elementary school children that educators can integrate into their schools and classrooms. The most effective antiviolence efforts focus on measures that prevent all types of children's bad conduct: aggression, bullying, and hate bullying. The most effective school antiviolence programs use four strategies: (1) teaching social competence; (2) creating a positive, calm environment; (3) establishing behavior standards; and (4) establishing rules and regulations for responding to violence. Violence prevention efforts need to move beyond the classroom to encompass the playground and to enlist the support of parents. The best strategies to help children develop social competence are those implemented as part of a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to nurturing children at home, in school, and in the community. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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PREVENTING VIOLENCE BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Young children face a vast and increasing array of challenges as they attempt to develop prosocial competencies and a conciliatory, nonviolent approach to life. They suffer from a lack of closeness with adults, but also from an overabundance of exposure to graphic violence in the news and entertainment media and, increasingly, in their homes and communities. All these forces affect the temperament of children, and each child expresses a unique set of responses to potentially inflammatory situations.

Mental health and education professionals generally agree that it is essential to begin developing prosocial attitudes and behaviors in children at a very young age because aggression that is not remedied nearly always leads to later acts of delinquency (Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo, & Kendrix, 1995). This digest presents an overview of effective antiviolence strategies for use with elementary school children that educators can integrate into their schools and classrooms.

Principles and Goals of Violence Prevention Practices

The most effective antiviolence efforts focus on measures that prevent all types of children's bad conduct: ***aggression***, including undirected anger, such as tantrums, and lashing out at others; ***bullying***, which is targeting someone thought to be weaker; and ***hate bullying***, which is victimizing someone of a different (and perceived to be inferior) gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Prevention measures seek to help children feel cared for, secure, and attached to supportive institutions and individuals. In fact, the most critical factor in promoting children's social development may be bonding with positive, nurturing adults: teachers who offer acceptance and support, model prosocial behavior, and convey the importance of having positive values (Gregg, 1998). Student-school bonding, also important, results from children's active involvement in the educational process; and their development and use of behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal competencies (Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998).

The most effective school antiviolence programs employ four strategies. The first is ***teaching social competence***: specific instruction in positive interpersonal skills (Gregg, 1998). Instruction can be consolidated in a separate antiviolence curriculum, introduced to children as they are learning other curriculum topics, or both. Students are trained to develop the following competencies (Greenberg, Kusche, & Mihalic, 1998; Slaby et al., 1995):

- Understanding and recognizing the emotions of oneself and others.
- Accurately perceiving a situation to enable appropriate responses.
- Predicting the consequences of personal acts, particularly those involving aggression.
- Staying calm in order to think before acting, to reduce stress and sadness, to replace aggression with positive behavior, and to control anger.
- Understanding and using group processes (including peer mediation and conflict resolution), behaving cooperatively, and effectively solving social problems.
- Selecting positive role models and supportive mentors, and nurturing peer relationships.

Techniques that schools and teachers can employ to implement the second strategy, ***creating a positive, calm environment***, are discussed below. The third and fourth strategies, not discussed in detail here, are ***establishment of behavior standards*** and ***establishment of rules and regulations for responding to violence***.

Antiviolence Programs and Policies

Some educators advocate a separate curriculum that promotes the above-described social competencies in K-6 children. Second Step has such curricula for each of several grade groups (Gregg, 1998). BrainPower teaches African American boys to interpret social cues correctly and respond appropriately (Samples & Aber, 1998). The Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum develops emotional and social competencies and helps reduce aggression (Greenberg et al., 1998).

Other theorists, however, believe that the overall school environment should promote a prosocial approach to life, instead of just a separate prevention program. They recommend that school personnel model and teach these competencies across the curriculum (Noddings, 1996). The PeaceBuilders program, for example, has five principles: (1) praise other people, (2) avoid put-downs, (3) seek wise people as advisors and friends, (4) notice and correct hurts one causes, and (5) right wrongs. The Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program takes a hybrid approach; it trains educators to provide students with instruction in peer mediation and bias reduction, and parents to resolve conflicts nonviolently at home (Gregg, 1998).

The school safety movement is based on the belief that a focus on safety, rather than implementation of individual antiviolence programs, gives students a sense of security. It calms aggressiveness in at-risk children, alleviates fears that provoke bad behavior, and promotes good behavior by all (Stephens, 1998).

Strategies Beyond the Curriculum

Many overall approaches to school organization, teaching, and classroom management can promote children's caring and cooperation and minimize their behavior problems. They can be employed as part of a schoolwide antiviolence program or curriculum, or be used on an *ad hoc* basis. Here is a sampling of such strategies:

Schoolwide

Schools seeking to eliminate students' aggression establish the "norm of nonviolence" (Hawkins et al., 1998, p. 194). They have a calm and predictable atmosphere that provides a sense of security and limits the possibility that unforeseen events will

trigger explosive behavior. They specify and explain behavioral expectations, counter public and familial messages of violence by providing prosocial alternatives to fighting, and foresee and attempt to prevent possible bad behavior (Hawkins et al., 1998; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Also, schools with adequate facilities and a population consonant with their size are more likely to be nonviolent (Samples & Aber, 1998).

Inservice training for teachers can specifically train them to model prosocial behavior; and to promote students' feelings of self-worth and empathy, foster their achievement and develop appropriate expectations, respond to their needs, and lower their aggression level (Greenberg et al., 1998).

Classroom and Playground

Traditional means of "controlling" a classroom can actually exacerbate children's aggression. Alternative ways of maintaining good conduct can be more effective. Teachers can work with students to develop a list of rules for acceptable behavior. They can establish the norm of cooperation and mutual respect and enlist everyone's support to ensure that no students are isolated or bullied (Banks, 1997).

In general, it is more effective for teachers to deal with misbehaving children quietly, in private, and with as little attention as possible (Walker et al., 1995). Thus, they can ignore any students who are quietly misbehaving in class (such as not reading along with the others) and approach them privately later to discuss their reasons for not participating. Instead of showing anger and/or publicly disciplining an unruly student, teachers can recommend alternative, less disruptive behavior for getting attention. They can calm an agitated child by helping to solve the precipitating problem and being firm about not bestowing additional attention on the child if the scene is repeated.

Providing students with rewards for prosocial behavior in class or at play deters aggression. Teachers can give students points for attendance, preparedness, and performance that qualify them for an extra school trip, for example. Parents can be kept apprised of their children's behavior through reports on the number of points they are earning (Hawkins et al., 1998).

Teachers can organize cooperative play activities instead of winner-loser games, and urge children to help, rather than taunt, those with less athletic ability. Instead of responding to bad conduct on a playing field with punishment or attention to the perpetrator, they can facilitate peer mediation for arguing students.

Parent Involvement

Through centers, classes, and private meetings, schools can help parents promote the prosocial development of their children and recognize and respond to early warning signs. They can help parents understand the effects on their children of their own behavior and the importance of supporting school violence prevention efforts. Educators can also sensitively convey their own concerns about certain children and help families secure interventions, including mediation and counseling for both victims and perpetrators of bullying (Banks, 1997; Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998). Arguably, a school's most important antiviolence strategy may simply be helping parents appreciate that dismissing a child's small behavior problem nearly always results in the child's subsequent involvement in more serious antisocial actions.

Conclusion

The most successful strategies to help children develop social competence are those implemented as part of a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to nurturing children at home, at school, and in the community. Evaluations of existing programs can guide future program implementation, as can the technical assistance provided to schools by organizations such as the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence's Blueprints for Violence Prevention Program (Greenberg et al., 1998).

Public support for school antiviolence initiatives has been limited, however; resources continue to be directed at social controls, such as juvenile prosecution and detention. But besides increasing investments in youth violence prevention, society needs to strengthen communities by helping parents provide emotionally and economically for their children and controlling access to weapons (Flannery & Huff, 1999). Finally, those elements in society (including the news and entertainment media), which perpetuate the culture of violence in the U.S., need to consider whether their message is obviating the benefits of youth violence prevention efforts in the schools.

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